Transcript: Dera Williams

Save Your Oakland Stories

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IMAGES: Photo of Dera Williams taken 10-14-23

INTERVIEWER (Elena Botkin-Levy)
Today is October 14, 2023. We're recording at the Oakland Main Library for Save Your Oakland Stories. I'm Elena Botkin-Levy from GEMS Oral Histories and recording with Dera Williams today. I'm going to ask you to introduce yourself, your name, your age, and when and where you were born.

DERA WILLIAMS
OK. I'm Dera Williams, Dera Jones Williams. I was born in Arkansas in 1951. I'm 72 and my family migrated to Oakland when I was two years old. So I've been here.

INTERVIEWER
Do you have a first memory in Oakland?

DERA WILLIAMS
My first memory was at the… I have a couple of… first memory was very sad. Evidently, my father's mother, my grandma, paternal grandmother died. Her name was Florence and she died and my father couldn't afford… we hadn't been here that long and he couldn't afford to go back to Arkansas. And we lived downstairs from a woman who rented a place to us. And she was… I can remember her reading the Bible to my father. My father was, and I remember I told my mother, I said, I laughed, I said "daddy's crying he he he" and she set me down and explained. But I was just seeing my father cry. I think that's the only time I remember him crying, but, so that was a memory.

And then another memory was in kindergarten, which I wrote about it, first earthquake. When I was at Garfield Elementary School and the teachers told us to get under the desk and my friend, my best friend and I were under the desk.

INTERVIEWER
What else do you remember about that earthquake, that moment?

DERA WILLIAMS
Not knowing what it was, not knowing. Being afraid. But then we, my friend and I, we held hands. Peggy, we held hands. And just not knowing, the unknown. But then I guess the adults in my life did a good job because I was, I fairly, you know, trusted them fairly well. And so, but I just remember that earthquake. One of many.

INTERVIEWER
California.

DERA WILLIAMS
Yeah.

INTERVIEWER
So talk a little bit about your neighborhood when you were growing up.

DERA WILLIAMS
So we… the first neighborhood, I don't remember that much about the neighborhood. More about the neighbors. And we had a family that she had four boys, and one of them was Ralph. And because he's around my age, so I remember him. And like I said, the neighbor that we rented from, I remember her. And I just remember we did a lot of walking because my father had… yeah, my mother wasn't driving then.

Then we moved to 24th Avenue and we lived on the corner in this gray house right there on the corner. And there were a lot of memories there, a lot of memories. And one of the… it was across the street from Manzanita school, where I eventually went to 1st grade. Because I attended Garfield Elementary for kindergarten. Then I started going to Manzanita. So it was Manzanita.

There was, up the street was one of my mother's friends from Arkansas, Miss Fifi. Miss Cl… we called her Miss Clara. The Fifi family, they lived on up the street on the corner. I remember she took care of me sometimes and she, her husband went to work in the late afternoon and so she was always cooking. There was always food, and red beans and rice, and so I remember that there was always food there.

Then we… the neighborhood, there was a lot of a lot of different families. There was a family of four blonde girls. There was Celia who was their Mexican American and her mother made tortillas.

There were blackberries all through that neighborhood. All through that neighborhood. We had blackberries in our backyard.

And then on the corner my… when I got ready for school my mother left. She taught, she substituted, and she left for work and then she took my sister with her. I don't remember about my brother, but I remember at a certain time I was supposed to leave the house and do… and go walk across the street to the school right there. They had the yard, the traffic monitor and the yard people and all that. But there would be a group of girls, high school girls, waiting for the bus by my house and they would, they would play the radio and I remember the Shirelles. I remember, you know, The Everly Brothers. I'm, I'm, I'm really dating myself. The Everly Brothers and all all that. And they would… and so then I would… you know, of course I wanted to listen to that, you know, but so that was, that was, it was good memories.

INTERVIEWER
It's amazing. And you have documented so many of your Oakland memories in a book. You're a writer, and so you have one pre book out.

DERA WILLIAMS
Preview, yes. Of of a collection, Oakland collection.

INTERVIEWER
And what kind of stories are in this preview?

DERA WILLIAMS

So they're my memories of growing up… in the book is… in my backyard, stories of growing up in Oakland. And so they're the stories that I remember. The people, the places, the walks. We walked to the library, we walked to the park, we walked everywhere. And it… we just had that freedom. And then we would walk in groups. You know, as I got older, we'd have a group of friends and we would walk and walk and walk. It seemed like we'd walk everywhere. But yeah, so the book, so the… what I'm compiling are the stories. And so there, you know, my life, my life. So, and I've been told, and a friend and I talked about this, and we said we're not going to apologize for our childhood. We had happy childhoods. We're not going to apologize for it. Because I was told that "oh you, it was like you were a Black Cleaver family." The Beaver and Cleaver, all those. But so yeah, I had a good, good childhood, good neighborhoods. Then we moved to, when I was in 6th grade, we moved to Allendale area. I was on Brookdale Avenue. Started 6th grade there.

INTERVIEWER

And was that different.

DERA WILLIAMS

It was, it was different. So Manzanita was very diverse, very mixed with everything, with everything. Over on Brookdale and at Allendale School it was more, more white. There weren't that many Black children and there was some things getting used to. But, you know, you're, you know, you make friends and you... Yeah, it was a little, a little different. But, you know, we rolled right into it.

INTERVIEWER

I know there was a story that you wanted to read, and I wonder if now's a good time to read, or at least part of it?

DERA WILLIAMS

Well, well, yeah. Piece of ways, not so much read. Well, I'll tell you about it. I had my best friend Jennifer. She was one of four girls and her name was Jones too. And there were… she lived... I lived on the corner of 24th and East 21st, I think. No East 26th. And she lived on East 27th, down further, going towards Fruitvale, but not not that close to Fruitvale. And so she would… So, either I would go over to her house or she would go over to my house. And this was… we became… we met in 3rd or 4th grade, we became best friends in fifth grade. So she came to my house and then I would walk… We would walk…. I would walk her down to the corner store where we used to get pickles, dill pickles, and walk her that far. And then she'd say, "OK, well let me, I'll walk back this much with you." So then we would walk each other. So I walk her down to the next block, and sometimes my poor brother was with us. And then we would walk each other back and forth. So I was telling my mother about it as an adult and she started laughing. She said that's piece of ways. And I said "what? what?" she said they, she did the same thing back in, she was in rural Arkansas, Southern Arkansas. And that's the same thing she did with her friends. They'd walk each other back and forth on the way home. As I I didn't know that was, it was a thing. But this is just an example of what we would do.

[Reading] “We became best friends in 3rd grade at Manzanita School. When Jennifer came to my house and was returning home, I would walk with her down Brookdale.” This is after we had moved to Brookdale. “I would walk with her down Brookdale across 35th Ave. about four to five blocks to School St. and send her on her way to the remaining 6 to 8 blocks home. When I left Jennifer's house to go home, she would walk with me down East 27th to Fruitvale Avenue where we stopped at the corner store and bought big dill pickles and a pack of grape Kool-Aid to dip them in. Eating our, eating our treats, we continued on Fruitvale to Brookdale where we went our separate ways, me going up Brookdale and Jennifer heading back down towards Fruitvale.”
So, as the example, we would just, you know, walk each other part way. And so that was a memory. I'm writing a story. Jennifer died about 20 years ago, and I'm writing a story now about her, our friendship.

INTERVIEWER
Sounds like a special friend.

DERA WILLIAMS
Yeah.

INTERVIEWER
How do you think… it sounds like you're talking about doing all this walking and going to the neighborhood store, getting the pickles. Do you think the culture of walking is the same today as it was then?

DERA WILLIAMS
No, not at all. No, not even when I raised my daughter in Oakland and she's in her early 40s. No it's just not there… and I imagine there are, maybe, there are some pockets in Oakland that the children do that where they walk to the store and they walk to the wherever they need to go. But we, I… when I think about the things we would… where… as far as we would walk. And we always knew, you knew, when you were supposed to come home and we'd be scurrying back to get home, get home at the appointed time. But I just don't feel like there's… I didn't allow my daughter to just go walk around the corner to her friend's house by herself. So, no, in answer your question, I don't feel like it's… it was… it was like it was

INTERVIEWER
So there's been a lot of changes in the city?

DERA WILLIAMS
Yes. Yes, yes, it has been. It has been. I think the neighborhoods were more cohesive. And like I said there probably are some pockets where people are to have made those kind of connections, neighbor connections. But I haven't, I haven't seen them in these last few years.

INTERVIEWER

One of the stories that stuck out to me from your book was walking home after school and there was people kind of keeping an eye on you, but you didn't know.
DERA WILLIAMS
Yes, yes. And I didn't…

INTERVIEWER
Can you tell that story?

DERA WILLIAMS
Right. Because. So yeah, my… yeah, I thought because… OK, so for I think for part of the way, at the end of when we moved, I was still going to Garfield and so I think there was a few more weeks of school left in kindergarten. So I remember one time this older girl used to walk with me. But what I found… So then I started walking… because I knew different landmarks. I get to Mrs. Fifi House and she'd wave. Then I'd go down the street to Mr. Chris. I see Mr. Christofall and I wave at him, and I walk down 23rd Avenue and then my father's office, real estate office was on 23rd and I don't remember the street. And then I will go on to the school. And I thought I was a big girl. I was being a big girl, but I didn't know all those people were reporting to my dad. "She just passed here. Well, she just passed here. She's on her way. She should be there."

INTERVIEWER
Keeping an eye on you.

DERA WILLIAMS
Yeah. It was amazing. Yeah. That. That. I love that. I love that. Yeah. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER
When you think about, kind of, your life in the junior high, high school years. Are there any memories that you remember from that time?

DERA WILLIAMS
Oh yeah. You know, your awareness of boys and that… you're just… that age is… you can't… you think you know it all. You think you know everything. But I was telling, my granddaughter is a cheerleader with the local football league. I forgot what they call it. But what I… then I remember I had to go back... I saw… I didn't write a story about that. I was a cheerleader in 9th grade. So we… junior high then was 7th, 8th, 9th. It's now middle school, the 6th, 7th, 8th, and so they don't even call it junior high. So, but I was a cheerleader in 9th grade. So I had to... But I remember my mother making a uniform. I remember some, you know, doing some moves and we were dancing and all that. I don't remember that much about it. I remember one Valentine's Day, I think I was in 8th grade, this David - his name was Jones, too. David Jones walked up to me and he handed me a box, a box of candy and a heart. And I was like, "oh, thank you." And then I remember going home and showing my mother and she said, "oh, how sweet." And I didn't know that he liked me or… he was real shy. Real, real, very, very shy. He kept to himself. He was smart and so, that was, that was the extent of our personal contact. Oh yeah.

INTERVIEWER
Box of chocolates.

DERA WILLIAMS
Well, it was very nice.

INTERVIEWER
That was great. Where did you go to high school?

DERA WILLIAMS
I went to Fremont for two years, 10th, 11th. And I went to my senior year at Skyline. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER
What was it like going to Fremont?

DERA WILLIAMS
Oh, I well, I got gone, gone to school with the same people from junior high, some from elementary and junior high. It was… it was great. It was, I enjoyed it. There were teachers. I remember some of the teachers. I remember the games. I remember we had swimming and then I, unfortunately, I had swimming in the morning, so I would, my hair would get messed up in the morning and then, you know. But yeah, I remember that. I remember our classes. I remember looking at the older guys. I was in 10th grade and looking at the older guys. And my… Jennifer's cousin Mickey, he was a senior, we were sophomores. And then he would say "no, you don't want to have anything to do with him." He was blocking. You call… he would… certain guys he didn't want us to talk to. We would get mad with him.

INTERVIEWER
He was regulating.

DERA WILLIAMS
Yeah. So, yeah, I remember a teacher I had was probably the first hippie that I would call a hippie. And he, oh, I wish I could remember his name, but I loved the books that he selected for our English.

The… was it animals? Animals. What was that? The animal. Oh, really. Yeah, the animal. Where they, all the animals were ruling everything. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER
Animal Farm?

DERA WILLIAMS
Animal Farm. Animal Farm. Death of a Salesman. And we read The Great Gatsby. Yeah. So I remember those books.

INTERVIEWER
Other than schools that you went to, is there a location in Oakland from growing up that has a lot of strong memories for you? Our church?

DERA WILLIAMS
Our church. Yeah, our our church. Yeah, our church. Elmhurst United Methodist Church is on 83rd in deep East Oakland. So there was a lot of, we had a lot of activities. Of course church service, youth, the youth, MYF, Methodist Youth Fellowship, camping. Yeah, a lot of different events we would have at the church. And that was, you know, something we counted on every week to do.

INTERVIEWER
Every Sunday?

DERA WILLIAMS
Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, Yes.

INTERVIEWER
Would you? Was it the kind of thing where you had to get dressed up?

DERA WILLIAMS
Well, see that's the thing about it is that Easter Sunday used to be a time when people did put on their best. So it wasn't, it was just regular, it was just what we did. You put on your best dresses, you, you know, ladies wore stockings, and couldn't wait to be able to wear stockings. Well, look, we had garter belts. Oh my gosh, I have really... We didn't have pantyhose, we had stockings and garters. But it was expected. That was expected that you, you dressed. I mean, I mean I'm not we we weren't hat, hat wearing people but, you know, that was expected. So that was just the time. The way it was. Wearing your best clothes, Sunday church.

INTERVIEWER
This is the smallest snapshot into your life in Oakland. But I'm wondering if there's any other memories or stories that are just bubbling up in this moment that feel important to share.

DERA WILLIAMS
So yeah, yeah, the May Day back then that was a big deal. And I just can't… I'm going to… I was just over here and I said I'm going to have to do, when I'm finished with the program, do some picture searches because I want to find those pictures. May Day what, from what I know, what it is now. But then it was a big, big deal. We had the Maypole, we braided the Maypole. We wore these beautiful dresses and we did a May dance, a May Day dance around. And I you know… So one day on history, on Facebook, on the history forum, people start talking about that and I'm wondering how… well, I know times different… how we got away from some of those things, you know, But it was different meaning, different time. You know.

INTERVIEWER
Where would that May Day festival happen?

DERA WILLIAMS
Out, on the playground. On the out on the playground. And it was a big deal. It was… parents came. And you… I remember you braiding the Maypole. And the boys had on white shirts. And we would just yeah, go around the Maple.

INTERVIEWER
Do you remember what your outfit looked like or could have?

DERA WILLIAMS
I don't. My mother's sewed... I remember my mother making it. I don't. I don't remember. I remember maybe one years… and then the braids were different, you know, rainbow colors and all that.
I don't. I don't really remember. I was really like third, second, third, fourth. Yeah. Yeah. Good memories, I guess.

INTERVIEWER
Good memories. I guess, just to close for today, I wonder what's your hope for your next chapter in Oakland and for the city itself?

DERA WILLIAMS
Well, I hope, like with these stories, and the stories I'm writing, and like Black Gold storytellers, that the stories won't die. That's my biggest concern and hope that they don't. The stories will remain because time marches on.

I hope Oakland… There's a lot going on in Oakland and we… a lot of bad. And I want to get back to the times when the good times, the, you know, the times that are celebrated. And to a time where we could celebrate more than mourn, you know. And I don't know if it's just a sign of the times all over all, but I would like to, you know, have good memories and… so that our children and our families can have those memories.

INTERVIEWER
Yeah. Well, thank you for sharing a little bit today.

DERA WILLIAMS
Thank you. I can't wait to get this.